

## Civil War Book Review

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### Preserving the White Man's Republic: Jacksonian Democracy, Race, and the Transformation of American Conservatism

Fred L. Johnson  
*Hope College*, [johnson@hope.edu](mailto:johnson@hope.edu)

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## Review

Fred L. Johnson III

Winter 2020

**Lynn, Joshua A.** *Preserving the White Man's Republic: Jacksonian Democracy, Race, and the Transformation of American Conservatism*. University of Virginia Press, 2019 \$39.50 ISBN 978-0-8139-4250-6

The steady contemporaneous trampling of values and principles (e.g., respect for custom, tradition, and established institutions, to name a few) that, until very recently, were once hallmarks of American conservatism makes historian Joshua A. Lynn's masterpiece, *Preserving the White Man's Republic: Jacksonian Democracy, Race, and the Transformation of American Conservatism* a work of urgent relevance. Through a combination of diligent research, brilliant analysis, and forthright exposition, Lynn presents insights into the forerunner events whose legacy have proven so disruptive to the current sociopolitical climate of the United States. The compelling title is justified by contents that shed much needed light on the historical evolution of concepts, ideologies, and developments that have consistently strangled [or, at least, slowed] the fulfillment of the aspirational vision espoused by the *Declaration of Independence*: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal."<sup>1</sup>

The antebellum Democratic Party's repeated success in advancing white male supremacy while stymying reform movements, especially *any* perceived threats to slavery, was because such stances resonated "with much of the electorate" (5). Politicians and opinion-makers faithfully rewarded the power given them by white male voters, going beyond merely "proposing public policy" to craft and nurture a "political philosophy" that guaranteed white men's perpetual dominance (7). Such dominance extended well-beyond the public sphere into areas of race, class, manhood, sexuality, domesticity, and even notions of family life which "explains why all antebellum Americans found the stakes of politics so high" (7).

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<sup>1</sup> The Avalon Project [Online]: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy. See the website at: [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/declare.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/declare.asp). Accessed on February 14, 2020.

Key to the perpetuation of white male supremacy in the antebellum Democratic Party was the need to maintain social order and stability which was accomplished, in part, by manipulating the reduction of voter concerns down to one concern, idea, or issue. In the United States of the twenty-first century, the narrowing of complex problems into a simplified single issue (or simplified issues)—seductive because of their minimal intellectual rigor and useful because of their ability to attract and stir emotions—has compounded voter frustrations with government processes already perceived as cumbersome and ineffective. A similar result obtained during the nineteenth-century as power-brokers pruned the debates about the daunting complex challenges then confronting the nation. Rapid westward expansion, social stresses from immigration, technologic revolution, navigating the ever-shifting sands of federalism, and managing the increasingly dangerous confrontations about slavery were collectively recast as being debates about popular sovereignty.

Sold as a process “allowing white men’s right to legislate for themselves and all others, popular sovereignty preserved the racial exclusivity of democratic power in the white man’s republic” (28). The diabolical brilliance of repackaging discussions about, for example, whether or not individual Americans had the right to own a slave (or slaves), impose upon Native American lands, or make war upon Mexico, into litmus tests about the reality or fiction of self-government was, in hindsight, breathtaking. The antebellum Democratic Party’s success in asserting that citizens be left free to conduct their own affairs (irrespective of the brutal inhumanity or colossal injustice of that conduct) through popular sovereignty brooked no challenges. Those who posed any challenge were metaphorically tarred with the label “fanatic.”

Some of the chief fanatics were women who dared to participate in politics and opponents of slavery. Their unnatural agendas posed threats to a social order that, if not properly policed, risked unraveling into a nightmare of interracial sexual relations (and associated perversions). In a time when many believed that African Americans were “a different and inferior species of humans” and (so-called) experts questioned whether “blacks and whites were products of a single creation, or of multiple creations,”<sup>2</sup> the

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<sup>2</sup> From the PBS [Public Broadcasting Service] program “Race: The Power of an Illusion”. See the website at: [https://www.pbs.org/race/000\\_About/002\\_04-background-02-09.htm](https://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-02-09.htm). Accessed on February 15, 2020.

prospect of shared sexual intimacies between the races was nothing short of cataclysmic. Antebellum Democrats took consistent, decisive action to ensure that the levers of politics, the economy, and tradition remained firmly in their control to prevent the certainty of such a calamity.

Lynn spares nothing when he points out with biting certitude that questioning “any white man’s ability to govern themselves was a threat to all white men” (35). For antebellum Democrats, each person was a sovereign entity with the right to overrule laws or governmental actions that interfered with self-governance. Adopting the perspective of former President Andrew Jackson (1829 – 1837), they also viewed clerics with hostility, especially those who deigned to render moral judgments about the manner in which free men, i.e., sovereigns, chose to conduct the affairs of *their* liberty. For preachers who dared render moral judgment upon persons whose sociopolitical views and practices were deemed an affront to Heaven, antebellum Democrats responded with declarations that church meddling in the affairs of state would not be tolerated.

Along with the many other compelling insights in this work, one that stands out is the author’s examination of northern free state Democrats and their role in perpetuating a white man’s republic. Northern complicity in establishing, strengthening, and perpetuating that reality was most apparent when it came to the issue of slavery. Lynn demonstrates with glaring directness that the North was willfully complicit in philosophically justifying and materially abetting chattel slavery’s innumerable atrocities, noting that the “politics of slavery and race pervaded the culture of the entire free-state Democracy” [78]. The presence of such a poisonous reality in the North, linked to the horror-filled reality of the South, brings into stark relief the dispiriting depth and breadth of the obstacles confronting those who sought to remove slavery’s withering presence from the land.

*Preserving the White Man’s Republic* positively challenges the constraints of pre-Civil War historiography by analyzing issues like perceptions of James Buchanan’s lifelong bachelorhood and what it meant for assessments of his manliness (and, therefore, his fitness for being elected President of the United States). The result is a revelatory

discussion that points to the powerful association between “gender and domesticity” in “antebellum political culture” (121). Mirroring their amazing sleight of hand in reframing abolitionist critiques upon slavery into actually being attacks upon the sanctity of popular sovereignty, nineteenth-century Democrats asserted that the alleged deficiency of Buchanan’s bachelorhood instead positioned him to “be an impartial arbiter” which was especially important for the pro and anti-slave forces “competing in the territories” (122).

Along with his skillful analysis and interpretation, the force of Joshua A. Lynn’s achievement in *Preserving the White Man’s Republic* is supplied by his extensive research. Information from repositories ranging from the Library of Congress, to the Alabama Department of Archives and History, to collections at the Universities of North Carolina, Michigan, and Wisconsin attest to the dogged effort exerted to produce this work. The extensive endnotes per chapter provides further evidence of a focused determination to interrogate a mindset and ideology whose updated descendant has made its noxious presence felt in the twenty-first century.

Establishing a contextual foundation for discussing matters of gender, sexuality, notions of domesticity, and manhood—especially with regard to issues like conservative manhood—would have helped to make those portions of the narrative more readily accessible. Since nineteenth-century Americans were not nearly as openly expressive as those in the twenty-first century, a delineation of antebellum values and mores would have gone far in providing contemporary language to address that prior era.

Overall, Joshua A. Lynn’s *Preserving the White Man’s Republic: Jacksonian Democracy, Race, and the Transformation of American Conservatism* is a potent, well-researched and explicated analysis regarding a brand of American populism whose nineteenth-century white supremacist legacy has found an eager reception in contemporary America. Lynn’s work is a cautionary reminder that for many in the antebellum era, and their counterparts in the twenty-first century, “We the People” did not, and does not, include everyone.

**Fred L. Johnson III** is an Associate Professor at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. He is currently working on *General Robert E. Lee’s Priority Target: the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad*.

